

OUTLOOK

SUNDAY, JANUARY 6, 2002

CLOSE TO HOME

Backup for Our First Responders

The front line in the fight to ensure a more secure America begins with local government. While our armed forces pursue those responsible for the crimes of Sept. 11 and our diplomats focus on political support in the international arena, our local governments are, in the vernacular of emergency operations, the "first responders."

In Montgomery County, we've already moved to strengthen the capacity of our bomb squad and expand our hazardous-material response. We are building a new and larger emergency operations center and are increasing the size of our fire-recruit class. Public safety personnel are being supplied with 1,500 "personal escape masks."

Still, all this is just a beginning. For its "homeland security" program to be effective, the federal government must:

- Have a close working relationship with county and municipal governments. Local governments must have a seat at the table where decisions are made and have access to shared information. That should include security clearances for some local safety personnel.

- Increase resources for our public health infrastructure, especially at the local level. The concern about bioterrorism has revealed just how thinly stretched even our best communities are when it comes to dealing with a public health threat. Congress already has approved more than \$800 million, but still more needs to be done.

- Initiate an anti-terrorism block-grant program of at least \$3 billion a year to local needs. That money, matched by local resources, would help prepare com-

munities for "first responder" responsibilities. And it should go directly to local jurisdictions, rather than through the states, in order to streamline the process.

- Help strengthen public safety telecommunications capabilities. "Interoperability"—the ability of systems to communicate with one another—is critical.

Localities need federal help to fight terrorism.

Arlington's progress in this area was essential to effective action at the Pentagon. Montgomery County has moved to address the same issue since a fatal train crash several years ago revealed serious communications flaws.

In addition, federal help is needed to deal aggressively with commercial interference with public-safety frequencies.

We will need all the energy, ideas and patriotism that our local governments can summon if we are to overcome the challenges before us. Local first responders know that it takes cooperation and effective communication to meet the realities and needs of our post-Sept. 11 world.

—*Marilyn Praisner*

*a Democrat, is a member of the
Montgomery County Council and of
the National Association of Counties'
Homeland Security Task Force.*